Theoretical configurations and considerations on African popular culture

F.E.M.K. Senkoro
University of Namibia

As globalization marches ahead, clad in arms, equipped with precise tools, versed in international machination, trumpeted by a pliant but wide-reaching media, how alienated have we become, caught in the iron grip of a new empire? How far do our "peasants" feel the crisis overshadowing fields? How far do the nations of the South feel the "new apartheid" rearing its head in the international trade agreements? How far do we all feel the need for a "new humanism?" And how much does the land of Algeria itself, in which Fanon wrote the bulk of his work, entice us to reconsider the "problematic" of "national culture"? (Sharawy, 2003, p. 1)

Abstract

This conceptual paper deals with some theoretical configurations and considerations of the form and content of African popular culture/s. It problematizes the subject by raising some provocative questions that may produce further and, perhaps, new areas for discussions. The three leading questions are: What exactly is popular culture? For whom and by what means is such culture produced and consumed? To whom and to what end is such culture popular?

The paper touches on questions of identity, especially pertaining to the youth; and the link between popular culture and social, political and economic power. Further, the paper deals with aspects of production, including mass production, and consumption of popular culture. The role of popular culture in the political processes is interrogated in terms of mobilization, resistance, articulation and maintenance of identities that provide alternative ways of interpreting different social forces.

Issues of nationalism and national culture in the face of

"globalization" are also touched on vis-à-vis African popular cultures. We also ask whether we should view the subject from purely anti-elitist and pro-masses outlook. Generally the paper probes into the place of popular culture within the bigger definition of culture as a drapery of physical, mental and emotional actions whose nexus holds a particular people together within and oftentimes across generations.

Key words: culture, folk culture, globalization, high culture, identity, mass production, nationalism, popular culture, power

Definition/s: What Is Popular Culture?

A number of dictionary and encyclopedic definitions of popular culture have a single story of describing popular culture as a vernacular, or culture that is based on the perceptions and tastes of ordinary people as opposed to those of the educated elite. Such definitions imply that popular culture entails either activities or products that are suited to and reflect the tastes of the general masses of people"[1]. It is such kinds of definitions that even sired the concepts of folk, pop and high cultures. However it is important to note that the concept of popular culture holds different stories and meanings that are always contextual. They are to be found in the characteristics of the culture at hand, and the world outlook and the philosophical base of a given people.

The subject of popular culture has emerged as one of the sub-fields in several academic disciplines especially in literature, history and the arts, and in a number of symposia and congresses. It becomes quite imperative therefore, for the scholar of such culture to at least formulate a working definition of the concept by raising and attempting to answer a few questions that involve the complex mixture of aesthetic, social and political phenomena collectively forming what has come to be known as popular culture. Such scholar must prove to his/her audience why, if at all, it is necessary to stress on one or two of the aspects mentioned above over the others.

Folk, Popular, and High Cultures

There is a school of thought that distinguishes folk, popular and high cultures. Although folk culture, which is sometimes considered to be the only culture that can be popular, can seem to be similar to pop culture because of the mass participation involved, in some definitions

1 Refer to, for example, www.dictionary.com/browse/pop--culture.

such culture represents only the traditional, original and simpler and conservative way of doing things. It is considered to be so conservative, locally-oriented, and non-commercial that it is very difficult to relate it to change. Thus, while folk culture is considered to be stable and appealing to local people whose aesthetic sensibility provides for both individual happiness and lasting communal bonding, popular culture is thought of as being prone to change and adaptive to fresh and new ideas and practices. With this outlook in mind then, popular culture is seen as an interference to, and dilution of, folk culture as it appropriates and commercializes items of folk culture.

Some theoretical outlooks consider popular culture to be characterized by its accessibility to the masses in opposition to the modernized high culture that is not mass produced and is not for mass consumption. High culture such as the fine arts, theatre, opera, and "serious" literary works, whose appreciation requires wide-ranging training, experience, and reflection are all considered to be the characteristics of the lives of the upper classes. While items from folk or popular culture may cross over to high culture as they are subjected to reflection and analysis, high culture items do not cross over to the folk or pop cultural sphere. Through this outlook popular culture is largely looked down upon as being shallow compared to the complexity and sophistication of high culture.

The major question that arises here is: What exactly is the point of classifying culture into folk, popular and high cultures? If one cannot have a culture that is popular to all, doesn't each and every society/class/group have its own culture that is popular to itself? If so, would it not be correct to talk about popular culture among the rural folks, popular culture among the elites, popular culture in capitalist societies, popular culture among the urbanized youth, and the like? Isn't the separation of "folk", "popular" and "high" cultures done mostly by modern bourgeois cultural critics who are proponents that share the blindness of the object of cultural criticism, to borrow Theodor Adorno's words? Adorno (1976, p. 267) states the following regarding this issue:

> Modern bourgeois cultural criticism ….secretly finds a source of comfort in the divorce between "high" and "popular" culture, art and entertainment, knowledge and non-committal Weltanschauung….. This is the result both of an uncompromising opposition to being-for-something else, and of an ideology which in its hubris enthrones itself as being-in-itself.

Still on the dichotomy between high and other cultures, the most "popular" trend among literary critics in view of literature as part of popular culture has been to regard such cultural product purely from

aesthetic and sophistication point of view. It is this kind of approach that compares ingredients forming popular literature with those constituting standard literature, which, I think, can be summarized thus: Popular literature deals with emotions while standard literature concerns itself with the intellect. This approach would then be extended to all other sub-fields, including music.

Yet, others may view popular culture from purely anti-elitist and pro-masses outlook. In which case then, the term "popular culture" turns into an ideological tool rather than just a theoretical concept. It is insisted that popular culture must be viewed from the crucial point of what the people/masses want as opposed to what they consume because nothing else is available or just because forces opposed to their development claim they want and must consume it. Basically, this kind of viewpoint relates to the approach of popular culture in terms of power relations that we shall discuss shortly.

May be, as a way of raising further discussion, four points need to be taken into consideration regarding popular culture. First, some outlooks view popular culture as contemporary expressions of the cultural industrial products manifested by the masses or groups that represent the masses in contrast to elitist culture. Second, popular culture elicits and invokes historical conditions that are designated by mass communication, mass production and pass participation. Thirdly, popular culture alludes to or could intimate a challenge to accepted norms and beliefs that would dictate the superiority of "high" culture. Fourthly, popular culture can imply and signify all those acts that are done behind the backs of the powers that be, or even in front of such powers, in different, veiled forms such as in satire.

Characteristics of Popular Culture

Perhaps, as a way of adding to the definition of popular culture one can dwell on the general elements or characteristics of such culture. The characteristics can include, but are not limited to the most instantaneous aspects of a given people in their day to day lives. These characteristics are not static, as they constantly change depending on social, political, economic and historical factors. Thus, because of this dynamic nature of culture in general and popular culture in particular, the character and substance of such culture can be quite fluid. That is why, for example, the technological and, thus, media development that the recent centuries have witnessed has, at the same time brought about different types of influences on African popular cultures that at first seem to be very foreign but soon are accepted – albeit half-heartedly by

the older generations, as part of that culture. The proverbial saying that the world has turned into a very small village holds water in this regard as intercultural contacts increase. These contacts are in all spheres of life such as in the arts and humanities and in sciences. These in turn have affected and even changed many aspects of each peoples' attitudes and tastes, belief systems, customs and traditions (including leisure activities) and even science and technology.

Taking all these into consideration we may tentatively define popular culture as widely accepted identity forms and products of a given people/society or even a group of people in that society at a given time in their historical and material development.

Our definition tallies well with Delaney's (2007) which describe such culture as:

> …the products and forms of expression and identity that are frequently encountered or widely accepted, commonly liked or approved, and characteristic of a particular society at a given time.[2]

Popular culture is characterized by inclusive, heterogeneous, and collective efforts and creations of the masses of people as their general world outlooks form and forge shared identities and pride.

We may wish to compare these definitions with that of Barry Brummett in Rhetorical Dimensions of Popular Culture, that sees popular culture as the 'culture of the people', which is regulated by the interfaces between such people in the totality of their everyday lives, that include styles of dress, the use of slang, greeting rituals and the foods that people eat; but also that include a wide array of genres such as music, print and other media, sports, and entertainment/leisure.

African Popular Culture

There is a wide spectrum of different issues pertaining to African culture. These include, but are not limited to: the 'failure' of the post-colonial state in Africa that has, as its bedfellow, the postcolonial subject facing various crisscrossing socio-cultural identity dilemmas; the "modern" direction of African culture from national to transnational identity, the oftentimes misguided, stereotypical Western perception of Africa, Africans and their cultures; reimagining of African cultures in the face and fate of globalization that brings with it some concepts which may be subverting older ways of viewing popular culture; and, most recently, Africa as an "emerging continent", or "Africa arising"; or, as

2 Quoted from https://philosophynow.org/issues/64/Pop_Culture_An_Overview

CNN would put it, "Africa - a continent you thought you knew." Here we are interrogating and asking questions as to how Africans imagine and negotiate the cultural space at both local and transnational levels.

In considering the above deliberations we are searching for the various ways in which the cultural trope has been imagined across generations, nations, and regions; and are insisting therefore, that perhaps this narrative has to be faced with a generational method so as to reveal the potentials they offer for a methodical appreciation of cultural trends and fluidities which function both with a concern on the way in which such cultures have developed and evolved through time; and how such cultures have existed at one point in time.

The Dynamism of African Popular Culture

It is important to note that when we talk about African Culture/s in general and African Popular Cultures in particular we are not thinking of an Africa that is so static that the masks, folklore, medicines, and the likes that existed before the colonial plunder are the only authentic folk and popular cultures of the African people. Culture, any culture, cannot be static. It is a very dynamic spectrum of diversity and an ever-changing phenomenon that sheds off some skins, taking on new ones, and even borrowing and lending some of such skins.

We may as well interrogate the distinctions that we looked at earlier and break away from the folk-popular-high cultural syndrome by dealing with other important aspects that may help us to understand popular culture.

Popular Culture, Power and Identity

The role of power and identity in the production and consumption of popular culture cannot be overstated. Popular culture is an epistemic phenomenon that involves manifold yet supportive agencies and actors that reciprocate. In looking at the subject, we need to touch on questions of identity and the link between popular culture and social, political and economic power. It is insisted that such an examination must, of necessity, be of a historical perspective that will, in turn avail us the chance to understand the ubiquitous social, political and economic changes taking place in our societies. In so doing, and in touching on the aspects of production and consumption of popular culture, we are arguing that we must take on board the socio-economic and political conditions that in turn create new identities.

Popular Culture, Mobilization, Resistance and Articulation of Identities

Popular culture has a role in the political processes in terms of mobilization, resistance, articulation and maintenance of identities that provide alternative ways of interpreting different social forces. Indeed, an examination of popular culture may, at the same time, aid in the interpretation, understanding, management, and even resolution of different conflicts facing African societies, be they social, political or economic.

Our illustrative examples of the subject will be drawn from various facets of what we consider to be popular culture for the youth in Africa. The first that comes to mind is music that has found its vent in many styles, local and foreign. Hip-hop music has proved to be a ready medium through which African youth express their hopes, aspirations, fears, indignation and sometimes outright opposition to the status quo. This form of popular culture side by side with other popular cultural forms, such as the art of cartoons, have provided and continue to provide for social, political and economic debates that in turn reflect and mold public opinion.

Looking at the historical perspectives of the formation of popular arts and culture, we can recall the words of Karl Marx who observed that no social order ever perishes before all productive forces for which there is room in it have developed. New higher relations of production never appear before the material conditions of their existence have matured in the womb of the old society itself. It is from this standpoint that the dynamic nature of culture - be it popular or otherwise emanates. The process involves moving from civil society to human society, i.e. maturing to socialized humanity. This is what constitutes progress. It entails an examination of the social conditions that beget popular culture, conditions that overlap between the aesthetic and the historical and are used as modifiers of an otherwise relatively constant human development process while making art and culture flourish by constructing general periods of such a process. Here then are issues of the formation of cultural production, consumption and reproduction. It is from such dimensions that the character of popular culture is determined. The role of popular culture can henceforth be looked at in terms of political and social mobilization, resistance, articulation and maintenance of identities. All these provide alternative and sometimes complementary ways of interpreting different social forces and understanding popular arts and culture better.

Scannell et al. (1992), and Corner and Williams (1961) emphasize on the quality between culture and power. On the one hand there is a concern

with the artistic, the aesthetic sensibility, the creative, representational activity, and on the other, the nature and organization of social activity, in other words, ways of living.

The cultural status of hip-hop music is clearly shown today in the media, and in public performances. Through it power relations are reproduced. The hip-hop or rap numbers are sung mostly in local languages of a relevant country such as Kiswahili in East African countries - a language understood by the majority of the people; and also in slang that is better understood by the youth. In asserting these power relations, the questions of reception are important, for hip-hop music is more easily assimilated by the youth than other art forms. It is easy for the youth to make sense of what they hear in such music. In the face of cut-throat competition where the majority of the youth find they are jobless or relegated to "messenger jobs" the best way to vent the frustration of such youth seems to be in hip-hop and rap music. Paradoxically, though, in some of the hip-hop and rap music from East Africa in particular, one finds both the sense of cultural homogenization on the one hand, and social diversification on the other. There is a sense of commonness of cultural heritage and then a tendency to fall back to the "language group" through, sometimes, the joking relationships that exist among different language groups, especially in Tanzania, and, thus, the assertion of "Mi Mmasai bwana" ("I am proudly Maasai"). Again, this calls for rethinking the consumption of popular culture whereby the audience has become an active participant not only in the production and sharing of such culture but also in consuming it. It is within this realm that the boundaries of the character and scope of audience reception and interpretation of cultural products are determined. In this way, identities are negotiated and processual in character rather than essences.

The identity issue goes further so that, through hip hop music the youth insist that they are at least symbolically distinct in their outlook and needs. Yet again once in a while a message is put across that while people can be socially different, they, at the same time can share the same culture. This then, is the interrelation between cultures and identity that can, indeed make a very interesting study.

The youth in East Africa, through their upbeat, have decided to speak their minds out in no uncertain terms although they have also decided to use the satirical voice to air their views. We have such artists like Juma Nature, Profesa Jay, Lady Dee, Zay B, Inspekta Haroun, Wagosi wa Kaya, Lady Q and others in Tanzania who are asserting their rights as part of the nation. This is in contrast with the popularized idea that states that the youth are the nation of tomorrow. At one time in Kenya Giddi Giddi Maji Maji took the public by storm before and after elections

with Ubwogable (You just can't scare them) topping the charts. From Kenya we also can mention Mercy Myra, Susan Kibokosya, and Henry Mituku, among others. These youths have been saying that they belong to, and are a part and parcel of the nation today. A group like Olduvai Gorge played a number prior to the year 2000 general elections in Tanzania that charged that those who had been elected to the parliament before had let the people down since all they had done was to fall asleep during parliament sessions. Similarly, the song "Nchi ya kitu kidogo" ("A country full of corruption") by EW (Eric Wainana) became so popular in Kenya prior to elections that it was subsequently used by the opposition alliance more or less like its signature tune that helped drive the point home to the electorate regarding the corrupt government. A very interesting formal aspect of this kind of music is the mixture and blend of Swahili, English and local languages. This blend may, perhaps symbolize very interesting and complex cultural mix that calls for a fresh approach as we think and re-define African cultures, identities and the different brands of nationalism.

Although a lot can be deliberated on the role that music has played and continues to play as a popular form of culture among the youth in Africa, for now, it would seem that the current hip-hop and rap music fever that is gripping Africa results from social upheavals whereby society is necessarily reproducing itself under the repressive era of globalization that in turn takes from the foreign while casting aside the excitement with the same foreign. The ideology that emanates from the hip-hop and rap music must be viewed as part of a popular culture, which must, itself, been seen in terms of the material life process.

Yet we must guard against viewing culture as a product of specific interest groups to which its phenomena are assigned. It is important to translate the general social process and tendencies expressed in such circumstances through which our criticism turns into an examination of "the whole" rather than "just part of the whole". The sociology of culture, in its most recent and most active forms, must be seen as a conjunction and merging of very different interests and methods.

On another plane, the flourishing of hip-hop and rap music in Africa may as well be a manifestation of "the language of commodities", if one may borrow Karl Marx's terminology. Here is where articles of utility, even mental, aesthetic utility, turn into commodities as they become products of the labour of private investment over and above the common labour of society. Musicians, through free expression of opinion channelled via hip-hop and rap forms, are now selling their labour power as commodity to the capitalist market attaining some value form hitherto not recognized. It is, thus, important to touch on the

issue of commodification as one deliberates on African popular culture.

We stated elsewhere how cultural industries that include literary and artistic products are, by and large, categories of history that reflect a given people's sense and sensibility at a given time in their social evolution. The new development whereby rap and hip-hop music is played a lot in African radio stations and beyond, is a new revolutionary zeal among the youth that are very critical of the political, social and economic policies and conditions in their societies, especially in the face of the so-called globalization. Since most of the music deals with sensitive issues like the corrupt politician, hip-hop and rap music is, inevitably, satirical. This is part of popular satirical culture that is pouring out of Africa today. There is some kind of renascence, a new form of cultural awakening among the youth in Africa. These have made a turn-around in their artistic sensibilities so that the excitement and anxiety of the purely foreign in music is fast dying out. Now, traditional music albeit in mixed forms of hip-hop and rap, expressing traditional themes, is taking the front seat even in discotheques. The revolutionary cultural spirit of the early seventies seems to be coming back. This new development is, indeed, a manifestation of power relations in our African societies.

National Culture and National Pride in the Face of Globalization: A Query

The question of identify raises a more fundamental one of nationalism, national culture and national pride in the 21st century Africa. As early as 1962, Mwalimu Julius, K. Nyerere (1967, p. 186-187) had stated the following:

> I believe that culture is the essence and spirit of any nation. A country that lacks its own culture is no more than a collection of a people without the spirit that makes them a nation. Of all the crimes of colonialism there is none worse than the attempt to make us believe we have no indigenous culture of our own; or that what we did have was worthless – something we should be ashamed, instead of a source of pride.

The time when Nyerere made these remarks was a period of necessary self-assertion and self-assessment. For, indeed, they were made immediately after independence. That notwithstanding, I think the question of a national culture and pride in Africa still arises and is more important to be asked now than ever.

The question of national culture, national pride, and nationalism has had many discussions from Mwalimu Nyerere, Frantz Fanon, Chidi Amuta, Partha Chatterjee, Alan Lawson, Timothy Brennan, Homi Bhabha, to David Cairns and Shaun Richards. All these and others have approached the question of nationalism from varying angles. Partha Chatterjee sees nationalism as an outright problem that seeks and fails to represent itself in the image of Enlightenment for the simple reason that the latter can only destroy itself by actualizing itself in the real world as the truly universal. The research for nationalism is even more compounded with different cultural fragments and frazzles used by nationalists since most of these are what Gellner (183, p. 56) refers to as "arbitrary historical inventions". The conclusion drawn by Homi Bhabha regarding this debate is that the language of culture and community is poised on the fissures of the present becoming the rhetorical figures of a national past.

These are very pertinent issues that call for seriousness in dealing with nationalism, popular culture and globalization. We began this subsection with a quotation from Mwalimu Nyerere, asserting the importance of a national culture. Yet, the issues that the scholars after him raise, especially in the face and realities of the so-called globalization, might, as well, be contrary to Mwalimu Nyerere's. This new reality necessitates the rapper and hip-hop artist from Africa to compose and produce that which will sell in the market. In so doing, such an artist finds himself or herself breaking the boundaries and the borders confined to the nation. Like a chameleon, the youth have to change their skin colors to match the trends that may as well go against nationalist feelings. And this calls for fresh approach as we rethink what we have popularly come to term African national cultures. In turn, this poses a very disturbing question: is it possible to genuinely talk about national culture, national pride, and nationalism in the face of the forceful global trends that act exactly against such feelings?

Conclusion

This paper has revisited the issue of culture and national identity in Africa, albeit in a summary form, to illustrate not only the contemporary so-called popular culture but also some critical understanding of this development as a contradictory process. There is, in this, the tension between the national and the universal – indeed, the national and the hegemonic western. In this tension are reflected the revolutionary and the reactionary aspects of popular culture – rap and hip-hop music included. We have insisted that the revolutionary moment of popular

culture must necessarily be looked at vis-à-vis the reactionary moment of populist culture. What we have not done which we think would have been quite interesting and informative, is to compare some aspects of contemporary popular culture with the dominant novel forms of the 60s and 70s that seem to have similar color and intent.

Epilogue

The above are by no means exhaustive thoughts on the subject of popular arts and culture. We have used especially, rap and hip-hop music as examples of popular culture. There are a number of other areas, of course, that would benefit our discussion a lot. For example, the relationship between popular culture and political, social and economic conflict fueling, interpretation, management, and resolution is very interesting indeed especially when looked alongside Ubuntu and African Philosophy. A good example that comes to mind here is the practice among certain South African societies where when someone did something wrong he was taken to the centre of the village and surrounded by all the villagers for two days while they speak of all the good he has done. The belief was that each person is good, and that when we make mistakes it is really a cry for help. Such a ritual unites the people with the wrong doer so as to reconnect the latter with his or her true nature. The belief is that unity and affirmation have more power to change behavior than shaming and punishing someone. This is part of the philosophy of Ubuntu that could be explored and utilized in solving many conflicts in Africa.

Also a general discussion of the state of the cultural sector in Africa would, I am sure, prove to be very useful in any deliberations regarding popular culture. For example many governments and development agencies, including the Bretton Woods Institutions, see culture clouded only in the traditions of a people. However, culture and cultural activities have continued to carry the stigma of not being important whereby in many African nations culture continues to be seen simply as the dances at the airport or state functions, or the so-called "traditional costumes" and foods. Critically examining the state of cultural sector in Africa, at the same time can highlight the importance and role of the realm in the national affairs of individual African countries, if not the whole of Africa. There is the need to bring to the fore the enormous contributions, both financial and in the livelihood of the people that the cultural industry can play as we rethink African popular arts and culture in the new millennium.

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